

BRUTALISM



CLOG

BRUTALISM

A defining architectural style of the post-war era—characterized by severe, abstract geometries and the use of cast concrete, block and brick—Brutalism arguably produced some of the world's least popular public buildings. The style's international propagation brought modern architecture to ever-larger constituencies, and some argue that the perceived shortcomings of these Brutalist structures led to the demise of the Modernist project.

While today often admired (and even loved) by architects, many Brutalist projects—Bertrand Goldberg's Prentice Women's Hospital, Marcel Breuer's Ameritrust Tower, Paul Rudolph's Orange County Government Center, Alison and Peter Smithson's Robin Hood Gardens, and Gillespie Kidd and Cola's St. Peter's Seminary, to name a few—are now threatened with demolition. Judging by the work of many contemporary practitioners, however, the influence of Brutalism only seems to grow. Before the wrecking balls swing, it is time to look back on, debate, understand, and learn from Brutalism.

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PROJECT ARGUS AND THE
ARCHITECTURE OF IMAGE

STEPHANIE LEE

With the monumental—the static stuff—we're bored; it telegraphs to us, because when you come to the middle you can see the end. Here, we bent over backwards to exploit something that is constantly shifting and moving and changing.

—Hugh Hardy¹

Since its construction, the Yale A+A building incited fierce opposition among students and faculty. With multiple level changes and rigid designation of program, the imperious building used its massive form and bush-hammered concrete to subject its users to the building's inescapable design and subliminally competitive program.

From this discontent, Project Argus was born. Led by Charles Moore, the Pulsa Group, and Ken Drury (along with his second year architecture studio), empowered students and faculty joined together to design and build a freestanding architecture that could aptly convey the anxiety of the building's inhabitants.

With an ambiguous geometric structure cloaked with a silver Mylar skin, Project Argus was essentially formless—an exquisite corpse that used basic architectural basics (such as wall, floor, ceiling, etc) with little regard for traditional roles and placement. Argus's frame served as hosts to colonies of light bulbs that were hung and laid out in various orientations to further disorient the space. While the A+A Building was adamant in its isolation and individuality, Argus absorbed and communicated with its exterior and interior environments through its reflective skin, flickering bulbs, and droning music—all of which invited occupants to fully immerse themselves in

the space.

Project Argus appropriated the language of Brutalism to reveal the building's shortcomings. Despite the A+A Building's intention to truthfully express construction process and materials, it continued to work within aesthetic parameters determined by the Modernists. As a result, the building's innards were fetishized and treated as architectural accessories that could be put on display. In Project Argus, infrastructural lifelines were not only visible but central to the experience. Such treatment questioned the A+A Building's superficial design and suggested a more prominent role for the technological underpinnings living within the building.

More broadly, Project Argus gestured at the failings of Brutalism to provide a language for architectural invention that accurately captured the cultural Zeitgeist, particularly in America. The prevalence of cinema and television, along with the invention of the computer, changed the conception of imagery, expanding it into something transient, communicative, and less monumental. Reyner Banham disregarded the changing cultural and technological climate, as apparent in his characterization of the image as "visually valuable"² and defined by an enduring architectural form. By shifting the focal point of the architectural experience from structure to inhabitants and activities, Project Argus challenged the ideological roots of Brutalism, uprooting the notion of imagery upon which many of its aesthetic principles were grounded.

1-C. Ray Smith, *Supermannerism: New Attitudes in Post-Modern Architecture* (New York: Dutton, 1977), 108.

2-Reyner Banham, "The New Brutalism," *The Architectural Review* 118 (Dec. 1955), 358.